



Louisiana History and Heritage Education Programs

Louisiana's Old State Capitol Museum of Political History

Tom Schedler, Secretary of State

www.sos.la.gov/museums



SLAVE NARRATIVES OF THE FEDERAL WRITER'S PROJECT Historical Background

The Great Depression and the Works Progress Administration

During the 1930s, a Great Depression crippled the economy of the United States and many other countries. Large numbers of people lived in poverty, desperately in need of more food, clothing and shelter. At the worst point of the Great Depression, in 1933, one in four Americans who wanted to work were unable to find a job. It was not until 1941, when World War II was underway, that the official unemployment rate finally fell below 10 percent. This massive wave of unemployment hit before the food stamp program and unemployment insurance existed¹. Government programs to help the poor or those in temporary difficulty were nonexistent. Furthermore, most wives did not work, so if the husband lost his job, all income for that household stopped.²

Franklin Delano Roosevelt took office in 1933 at the height of the Great Depression. In 1935, Roosevelt formed the Works Progress Administration (later renamed the Work Projects Administration--WPA) to create jobs that would allow individuals to maintain their sense of self-esteem. Many of these programs provided blue collar construction jobs as well as opportunities for women, children and African-Americans.³ Works Projects Administration programs also built theaters and schools, sculpted parks and public gardens, supported photo documentaries to document the plight of Americans and preserved local and state history and culture. During its brief existence, the WPA generated numerous documents consisting of written histories, oral histories, guidebooks, fine prints, plays, posters, photographs and architectural histories, many of them relating to African- American history. One such program was the Federal Writer's Project.

Federal Writer's Project

Many of Roosevelt's New Deal agencies addressed unemployment by supporting blue collar jobs in construction and conservation. However, Federal One, a project to support and preserve the arts, provided opportunities for teachers, lawyers, authors and librarians. The Federal Writer's Project was a highly criticized Federal One program that began in 1935 – opponents of the program felt that it diverted funds from the critical defense budget. The short-lived Federal Writer's Project ended in 1939, but continued to operate in some states through the early 1940s.

The Library of Congress' Federal Writer's Project collection includes 2,900 documents representing the work of more than 300 writers from 24 states. Many of these documents are oral histories that provide deep insight into the social and economic life of 1930s-era families and communities. This collection includes first-person narratives (called life histories) describing the feelings of people coping with life and the Depression. It also contains studies of social customs of various ethnic groups and authentic narratives of former slaves about life during the period of slavery.⁴

Slave Narratives from the Federal Writer's Project

The Federal Writers' Project of the Works Progress Administration (WPA) conducted interviews of former slaves during the 1930s. The result of these efforts was the Library of Congress Slave Narrative Collection, a group of autobiographical accounts of former slaves that today stands as one of the most enduring and noteworthy achievements of the WPA. Compiled in 17 states from 1936 to 1938, the collection consists of more than 2,000 interviews with former slaves, most of which are first-person accounts of slave life. The interviews afforded the former slaves an opportunity to give their personal accounts of life prior to the Civil War and to describe what it felt like to be a slave in the United States.⁵

¹ Moore, Geoffrey H. *Business Cycles, Inflation, and Forecasting*. Ballinger, Cambridge. 1980

² Schenk, Robert. *A Case of Unemployment*. www.ingrimayne.com/econ/EconomicCatastrophe/GreatDepression.html, 2005

³ The African American Mosaic. Library of Congress. www.loc.gov/exhibits/african/afam012.html, 2005

⁴ American Memory Project, Library of Congress. <http://lcweb2.loc.gov/wpaintro/wpahome.html>, <http://memory.loc.gov/ammem/snhtml/snhome.html>

⁵ Yetman, Norman. "The Background of the Slave Narrative Collection," *American Quarterly* 19, no. 3 (Fall 1967), 534-53, and "Ex-Slave Interviews and the Historiography of Slavery," *American Quarterly* 36, no. 2. 1984.



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Lesson: Examination of Interviews from the American Slave Narratives*

Grade	6-12
Subject	Social Studies, English
Time Period	1 class period

Abstract and Process

Students will examine and interpret interviews obtained by authors working for the Federal Writer's Project during the 1930s.

Process:

1. Students will read selected oral histories in order to learn about individual experiences of African Americans in the pre-Civil War period.
2. Students will meet in small collaborative groups with other students who read the same oral history and share their understandings and develop different perspectives on the reading.
3. Students will gather in reconfigured small collaborative groups (jigsaw) and share their understandings with students who read different narratives. Here the goal for students is to broaden their understanding of what the experience of slavery was like for individual African-Americans.

Goals:

Students will

- investigate texts of oral history narratives taken from ordinary Americans and collected by interviewers employed by the Federal Writer's Project during the 1930s.
- examine the lives and careers of ordinary people interviewed during the period of the Federal Writer's Project
- read and analyze oral interviews for specific content
- describe and summarize the content of individual texts for the benefit of other students
- explain how the process of selecting and synthesizing primary documents inevitably involves individual point of view and bias
- read and examine primary documents to gather content information

Concepts:

- New Deal programs experimented with a variety of methods for encouraging employment as a means of stimulating economic recovery.
- The stories of individual lives make up the stuff of historical investigation, but their use raises important issues and considerations for historians.
- Unemployed journalists and writers were employed by the federal government during the era of the Great Depression.

BENCHMARKS

- H-1A-M4 analyzing historical data using primary and secondary sources
- H-1A-H3 interpreting and evaluating the historical evidence presented in primary and secondary sources
- H-1B-M3 describing the interactions among Native Americans, early Europeans and Africans in America
- H-1D-M3 identifying and discussing the major conflicts in Louisiana's past
- H-1D-M6 examining folklore and describing how cultural elements have shaped our state and local heritage
- G-1B-M4 describing and explaining how personal interests, culture and technology affect perceptions and uses of places

Materials

Students will work with the slave narratives collected by the New Deal Network as well as additional sources found at Bruce Fort's American Slave Narratives: An Online Anthology (<http://xroads.virginia.edu/~hyper/wpa/wpahome.html>) and at the Library of Congress's American Life Histories: Manuscripts from the Federal Writers' Project (<http://lcweb2.loc.gov/ammem/wpaintro/wpahome.html> and <http://memory.loc.gov/ammem/snhtml/snhome.html>).

Lesson Procedure

1. To prepare for this lesson, teachers may wish to preview and download one or more of the narratives found in the collections listed above. Lead students through the selected interview and prepare them for the uneven nature of the stories they will be reading and the language which they may encounter.
2. **The Jigsaw Activity.** Select four to six of the individual narratives from any of the three collections listed above. Download and photocopy enough so that each student will read one of the selected narratives. Teachers may wish to base their selection of the narratives on some common theme or thread. For example:
 - First-hand accounts of slavery: the slave narratives in both the New Deal Network site and the University of Virginia site offer students a unique opportunity to read about slavery firsthand.
 - Life in the late 19th and early 20th centuries: many of the elderly subjects in each of the Life Histories provide interesting insights into every day life in the late 19th century and early 20th century: occupations, education, religion, entertainment, etc.
3. After providing a photocopied manuscript for each student, ask them to use a highlighter or pen to underscore phrases or selections from the reading which they find to be particularly compelling. (Teachers may wish to focus this aspect of the activity around a particular topic or investigation depending upon the course of study and the interests of their individual students.)

Jigsaw #1

Students who have read the same narrative should come together to discuss the main points of their reading with one another. Teachers might direct this segment of the jigsaw activity by requiring students to engage particular questions such as:

What was the most interesting thing you discovered about this subject's life?

In what ways was life for this subject both similar and different from your life or your parent's life?

Jigsaw #2

After students have had a chance to share their points of view, ask them to move to another configuration in which students who have read about different individuals will share their subject's stories with one another. Teachers may wish to ask students to propose generalizations drawn from a synthesis of their individual investigations. For example:

What aspects of slavery were shared in common by these men and women?

What was working life like for them?

What forms of entertainment occupied their leisure lives?

*Adapted from The New Deal Network, <http://newdeal.feri.org>

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Lesson: Comparing and Contrasting the Individual Experiences of African Americans in the 19th Century*

Grade	6-12
Subject	Social Studies, English
Time Period	2 class periods

Abstract/Overview

Students will compare and contrast selected experiences recounted in the former slave narratives from the Federal Writer's Project. This focused investigation will enable students to:

- realize the richly varied experiences encountered by African-Americans in the 19th century
- compare and contrast the life histories of former slaves interviewed during the 1930s
- interrogate primary sources in an effort to construct their own understanding and generalizations about events from the past

An Overview of the Activity:

This is a Web-based lesson that utilizes the New Deal Network and American Memory Web sites. Students need access to a computer to read the slave narratives on the Internet.

Students will work together in three groups to develop profiles of African-American life during three important time periods in the 19th century. Individuals in each group will investigate a different aspect of African-American life during one of the time periods and then share their findings with the other members of the group. Within each group, students will work with a partner(s) determined by the number of computers available. Adapt tasks to fit the number of students in each group. Students will investigate the lives of African-Americans as reflected in the slave narrative. Following the investigation, students in each of the three groups will confer with their group members to create a "typical" profile for African-Americans during the time under investigation. Students will then discuss as a class how and in what ways life changed for African-Americans during the mid-to-latter half of the 19th century.

OBJECTIVES

Students will

- investigate selected portions of the oral histories collected by interviewers of the Federal Writer's Project during the 1930s
- search the various narratives for comments on particular topics
- compare and contrast the variety of experiences encountered by ordinary African-American men and women during slavery, Reconstruction and the late 19th century
- analyze primary sources
- describe and summarize the content of individual texts for the benefit of other students

BENCHMARKS

H-1A-M4 analyzing historical data using primary and secondary sources
H-1A-H3 interpreting and evaluating the historical evidence presented in primary and secondary sources
H-1B-M3 describing the interactions among Native Americans, early Europeans and Africans in America
H-1D-M3 identifying and discussing the major conflicts in Louisiana's past
H-1D-M6 examining folklore and describing how cultural elements have shaped our state and local heritage
G-1B-M4 describing and explaining how personal interests, culture and technology affect perceptions and uses of places

PRE-LESSON PREPARATION

- schedule the computer lab
- make copies of slave narratives browsing guide for students
- To prepare for this lesson, teachers will want to preview and perhaps download one or more of the narratives found in the collection. Students should be well prepared for the colorful and sometimes difficult language that

they will encounter. This lesson is built around a hypertext index, which will enable students to navigate the various narratives thematically. (For example, see [Question 1](#).)

- **The Internet lesson screen that you will see is divided into three sections.**

1. **The top section or frame** contains a number of inquiry questions keyed to the topics and themes contained within the index. Teachers might select a particular question to investigate as an entire class or assign a particular question to individuals or a small group of students.
2. **The second section or left-hand frame** contains the index. Students may access an entire interview or a particular section of an interview by clicking on the appropriate link. The index is developed chronologically around the three main topical periods most commonly encountered in the interviews:
 - The Era of Slavery in the years preceding the Civil War
 - The Era of Reconstruction
 - The late 19th century

Each chronological topic is further subdivided into the themes most commonly considered in textbooks and by students in secondary classrooms. These include, but are not limited to:

- Conditions
- Daily Life
- Education
- Family
- Religion
- Work

Effective use of this index will allow students and their teacher, for example, to call up sections of the interviews in which the narrator recalls the conditions of slavery or the nature of education for African Americans during the late 19th century.

3. **The third section or right-hand frame** will allow students and their teachers to view the beginning of the portion of the text they have requested from the index.

PROCEDURE

1. Teachers might begin by selecting one of the former slave narratives to show to the class as an example of the kind of text with which they will be working. Lead students through a discussion about the value of using primary sources in investigating the past. Caution students regarding the issues involved in using interviews such as these. Prepare them for the language they will encounter and which may take them by surprise. Consider that the prevailing standards of equality and the atmosphere of multiculturalism which prevail in the 1990s were not the same as those of the pre-civil rights 1930s. Students should also be reminded that many of the people who are the subjects of the former slave narratives were well into their 70s or 80s at the time of the interview and that they were, in many cases, quite young when they experienced the events they describe. Also, the socio-economic and racial backgrounds of the interviewer and narrator were often different. Teachers might offer such questions as:
 - How would these factors influence the credibility of the interview?
 - Should historians ignore these sources knowing that some of these circumstances may have affected the outcome?
 - How do historians make decisions about who to believe and how much to believe?
2. Assign students to the three chronological groups:
 - A. Slavery
 - B. Reconstruction
 - C. The late 19th century
3. Students should then determine among themselves how to distribute the investigation of the various themes within each of the chronological periods. Teachers may wish to hold individual students accountable for their work by requiring that their findings be formalized, perhaps as an outline.
4. When students have had sufficient time to conduct their investigations, they should return with their findings to the larger (chronological) group to which they were assigned. They will need to compile their data and determine how to share the overall results (poster, PowerPoint, etc.)
5. When students in their chronological groups have completed generalizing about the overall findings of their topic, the teacher may lead a discussion or require an essay in which the class explores the issues suggested by their investigations. The following questions provide an example of how the teacher might guide this portion of the lesson:

- Did life change significantly for African Americans during the three periods studied? If not, why? If yes, how and in what ways?
- What issues if any did you confront as a student historian seeking to come to an understanding about this aspect of the past? How did you resolve these issues?
- Are your findings consistent with the information provided in your textbook? If not, how can you account for the difference?

*Adapted from The New Deal Network, <http://newdeal.feri.org>

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WPA Slave Narratives
Slave Narrative Browsing Guide

Directions: Open the following Web site to research your question(s).

Slave Narratives: <http://newdeal.feri.org/asn/lesson03x.htm>

<u>Question One</u> http://newdeal.feri.org/asn/quest01.htm	To what degree did the political and economic changes that occurred as a result of the Civil War positively affect the lives of African Americans?
<u>Question Two</u> http://newdeal.feri.org/asn/quest02.htm	How were the roles of African American men significantly different (if at all) from those of African American women in the periods before and after the Civil War?
<u>Question Three</u> http://newdeal.feri.org/asn/quest03.htm	How widespread were educational opportunities in the period before and after the Civil War?
<u>Question Four</u> http://newdeal.feri.org/asn/quest04.htm	To what extent were the individual lives of the narrators affected by the legislative turmoil which was swirling around Washington, D.C. during Reconstruction?
<u>Question Five</u> http://newdeal.feri.org/asn/quest05.htm	To what extent do the narrators describe actual physical abuse of slaves in the pre-Civil War period?
<u>Question Six</u> http://newdeal.feri.org/asn/quest06.htm	What evidence (if any) are you able to find that African Americans, either as slaves in the period before the Civil War or as freedmen in the latter half of the 19 th century, rebelled against the prevailing system?
<u>Question Seven</u> http://newdeal.feri.org/asn/quest07.htm	In her interview for the Federal Writer's Project, Charity Anderson responds to a question about her life during slavery by exclaiming, "My! Dem was good ol' days." To what extent would the experiences recounted in this collection confirm Charity Anderson's comment?

Tasks to Consider

1. Write a short story which captures the adventures of a fictionalized young African American boy or girl who was born in the 1850s.
2. Illustrate one of the selected themes by locating appropriate visuals on the Web or in your library and copying them and importing them into a PowerPoint multimedia presentation.